1 September 1999

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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Koji F. X. **Yamagiwa** (Japan)

II. Control and limitation of documentation

C. Access to the optical disk system

Introduction and overview

1. At its substantive session in 1998, the Committee on Conferences welcomed the efforts of the Secretariat to improve access to the optical disk system (ODS), in particular the establishment of additional ODS centres.

2. At its 418th meeting, on 30 August 1999, a concern was raised regarding problems related to access to the optical disk system at the United Nations Office at Vienna. In response to this concern, the Committee on Conferences decided at the same meeting to add a new sub-item (e), entitled "Access to the optical disk system", under agenda item 3, "Control and limitation of documentation". Since it was a technological issue, a representative from the Secretariat would be requested to address the Committee. The Committee considered this sub-item at its 422nd meeting, on 1 September 1999.

Discussion

3. The view was expressed that difficulties were experienced with the optical disk system at the United Nations Office at Vienna in connection with delays in the retrieval of documents, power outages, overloading of the system, registration of new users and communication with Headquarters, despite assurances from the Secretariat at the Committee's last substantive session that those problems would be rectified.

4. The view was also expressed that no budgetary provisions were made for ODS in the next biennium.

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5. The representative of the Secretariat gave a brief history of the existing structure of ODS, which was no longer capable of covering the unexpectedly increasing number of documents and users. He also drew the attention of the Committee to the feasibility study being undertaken by the Information Technology Services Division to overhaul the existing system. Regarding access, the network that connected the various duty stations, in particular Geneva and Vienna, was being significantly upgraded.

6. The representative of the Secretariat also drew attention to the human elements involved in the process, for example, the issue of indexing, which might cause delays in the availability of documentation. It was hoped that these errors could be eliminated by additional automation. Regarding the registration of users, the Secretariat assured the Committee that this problem would be looked into.

7. With regard to budgetary provision, the representative of the Secretariat informed the Committee that an amount of $600,000 was included in the proposed programme budget for the Information Technology Services Division for the biennium 2000–2001 for the overhauling of the optical disk system as a whole.

Conclusions and recommendations

8. The Committee took note of the information and clarification provided by the representative of the Secretariat.

9. The Committee recommended that sub-item 3 (e) on access to the optical disk system remain under review by the Committee.

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Rapporteur: Mr. Koji F. X. **Yamagiwa** (Japan)

II. Control and limitation of documentation

C. Translation-related matters

Introduction and overview

1. The General Assembly, in section B of its resolution 52/214 of 22 December 1997, expressed a number of concerns with regard to translation-related matters and requested the Secretary-General to take certain steps to meet those concerns.

2. In paragraph 28 of its resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998, the General Assembly encouraged the Secretariat to continue its efforts to ensure effective linguistic quality control through to the final stage of document production and distribution and to report to the Committee on Conferences on the steps taken in that regard.

3. At its 423rd meeting, on 1 September 1999, representatives of the Secretariat presented to the Committee on Conferences oral reports on translation-related issues and on linguistic quality control through to the final stage of document production.

4. At the same meeting, the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on the post of reviser (A/53/919/Add.1).

5. Also at the same meeting, the Committee witnessed a demonstration on computer-assisted translation by the Translation and Editorial Division of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services.

Discussion

6. Concern was expressed at the quality of translation done by conference services. Even though translation was a creative process and the judgement as to what constituted a good translation was inherently subjective, there had been documented cases of inaccurate

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translations where the sense of the original text had been distorted. Every effort should be made to improve the situation through training and more effective quality control systems. The representative of the Secretariat pointed out that special emphasis was placed on the training of translators at the P-3 level who were earmarked for self-revision, and that even the work of senior translators was subject to spot checks. A system of peer review had also been introduced further to enhance the quality of translation output. Freelance translators, most of whom were former staff translators, were selected through a rigorous selection process.

7. In response to a question raised at the 421st meeting with reference to the share of revision work in total workload of P-5 and P-4 staff at United Nations Headquarters, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, the representative of the Secretariat explained that the statistics given in table 1 of document A/53/919/Add.1 excluded that portion of the workload that was generated by functions other than translation and revision, namely, managerial and supervisory functions.

8. Concern was expressed over the fact that the rate of self-revision exceeded the established benchmark, namely 45 per cent.

9. A number of delegations commended the Secretariat on the introduction of new technologies aimed at enhancing the productivity of the language staff of conference services.

10. The view was expressed that, while problems did occur in ensuring linguistic quality control through to the final stage of document production, such problems were relatively minor. Every effort should nevertheless be made to keep such occurrences to a minimum.

Conclusions and recommendations

11. The Committee took note with appreciation of the oral reports on the matters presented by the representative of the Secretariat.

12. The Committee also took note of the report of the Secretary-General on the post of reviser (A/53/919/Add.1).

13. The Committee requested the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services to continue its efforts to utilize new technologies, such as computer-assisted translation, terminology databases and speech recognition, so as to enhance further the productivity of language staff.

14. The Committee recommended that efforts should continue to be made to ensure that training opportunities were available to all language staff, including those at duty stations away from Headquarters.

15. The Committee recommended also that efforts should continue to be made to improve quality control at all duty stations.

16. The Committee expressed its concern that the rate of self-revision had exceeded the established benchmark.

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Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Koji F. X. **Yamagiwa** (Japan)

IV. Review of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001: Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services

Introduction and overview

1. In paragraph 34 of resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998, on the pattern of conferences, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly at its fifty-third session a report on the impact of economy measures on the delivery of mandated conference services.

2. In paragraph 33 of the same resolution, the General Assembly took note of paragraph 62 of the report of the Committee on Conferences to the Assembly at its fifty-third session.[1] That paragraph recorded that, during the discussion by the Committee at its substantive session of 1998 of an item on improved coordination of conference services, it was stated, on the basis of information provided by representatives of the Secretariat during informal consultations, that no further budget reductions could be borne by conference services at the United Nations offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi.

3. At its 422nd and 423rd meetings, on 1 September 1999, the Committee considered the programme narrative on General Assembly affairs and conference services of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001 (A/54/6 (sect. 2)) and the report of the Secretary-General on the impact of economy measures on the delivery of mandated conference services (A/53/833).

4. The overall level of resources proposed for the biennium 2000–2001 reflected a net reduction in resources of 0.8 per cent, as compared to the revised appropriation for the biennium 1998–1999. The reduction would be achieved through various cost-saving measures currently in place, including improved management of resources budgeted for

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temporary assistance for meetings, increased capacity utilization, introduction of computer-assisted translation and the application of new technologies in the documentation and publishing services.

Discussion

5. Concern was expressed that, despite the efforts being made by the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, the cost savings mandated by Member States had resulted in a deterioration in the quality of the Department's output, in particular in the areas of translation and the timely issuance of documentation. The question was raised as to whether further budget reductions were compatible with enhanced productivity and quality of output. It was considered that the Committee should request the Secretary-General to provide more specific data on the impact of anticipated gains in productivity, notably through the introduction of new technologies, on the need for temporary assistance. The view was also expressed that, while the translation service offered significant potential for savings, the grade structure for its staff must be such as to ensure effective quality control.

6. Regret was expressed that the current format of the proposed programme budget did not allow for the budget proposals for conference services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi to be considered by the Committee. It was also noted that extrabudgetary funding for conference service staff at that Office far exceeded the level of funding from the regular budget. It was emphasized that the United Nations Office at Nairobi should be given equal treatment with other United Nations offices, including full conference services. It was further suggested that conference services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi be integrated into the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services.

7. The representative of the Secretariat explained that, unlike at United Nations Headquarters, Geneva and Vienna, conference services at Nairobi came under the budget heading of administration. It was confirmed that the greater part of the Office's resources were derived from extrabudgetary sources, and in particular from reimbursements from the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements.

8. The view was expressed that the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001 for the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services was not adequate to remedy the qualitative and quantitative deficiencies in the provision of conference services and that the Committee should recommend that the General Assembly give careful consideration to the proposed programme budget.

9. It was suggested that the Committee should call for the implementation of the recommendation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services contained in paragraph 155 of the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of that Office (A/51/810).

10. The view was expressed that the Committee should emphasize that the conclusion contained in the report of the Secretary-General on the possibility of establishing a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, that "supply does not necessarily create demand" (A/54/262, para. 7), was contradicted by data on the utilization rate for interpretation services provided at the United Nations Office at Vienna.

11. The view was also expressed that the Committee should emphasize that an increase in the use of temporary assistance and contractual translation services increased the need for revision at the senior levels.

12. It was suggested that the Committee should recommend that the General Assembly examine the possibility of establishing a minimal viable permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Vienna, taking into account its cost effectiveness.

13. Replying to questions raised, the representative of the Secretariat pointed out that the proposed programme budget for the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services for the biennium 2000–2001 formed part of the Secretary-General's overall budget proposals and was therefore subject to the same policy decisions regarding staffing levels and financial ceiling. The slight reduction in the allocation sought for the biennium 2000–2001 over the previous biennium should not cause any reduction in the quality or quantity of the Department's output. Indeed, much of the reduction would be offset by efficiency gains from the enhanced utilization of new technology. The reduction in funding for temporary assistance would be mitigated in part by improved management capacity and greater reliance on locally recruited freelance staff. In addition, off-site reporting was being introduced in the production of verbatim records. Conference services hoped to address remaining inadequacies through the further use of technology and adjustments to resource allocations.

Conclusions and recommendations

14. The Committee took note of the report of the Secretary-General on the impact of economy measures on the delivery of mandated conference services (A/53/833).

15. The Committee recommended that the lessons deduced from the above-mentioned report of the Secretary-General should be taken into account when the proposed programme budget for the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services for the biennium 2000–2001 (A/54/6 (sect. 2)) was considered by the Fifth Committee.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 32* and corrigendum (A/53/52 and Corr.1).